

For Immediate Release

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**Leaders of the Florida Legislature Speak Out Against Lawsuit to
Limit School Choice and Opportunity for
Low-Income Florida Families**

Tallahassee, Fla.—Top legislative leaders today spoke out in opposition to the lawsuit announcement by the Florida School Boards Association and others challenging the merits of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The leaders released the following statements:

Statement from House Speaker Will Weatherford (R-Wesley Chapel):

“It is appalling that the Florida School Boards Association, unions and others would use their power to try to block low-income parents from giving their children the education of their choice. This is a tactic completely motivated by the worst kind of bureaucratic politics that places the fears of an organization over the needs of children. We will vigorously defend this program because we know that it helps our most vulnerable children rise out of difficult circumstances and achieve true success.”

Statement from Senate President-Designate Andy Gardiner (R-Orlando):

“Since 2001, The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program has provided Florida students with additional options to achieve academic success. Close to 60,000 students and their families who may not otherwise have the resources are now taking advantage of the opportunity provided by this program. Without using state education funding, this program allows parents to have control over their child’s educational experience.”

“The decision to file this lawsuit is a self-serving attempt to obstruct Florida families’ ability to access choice. These groups claim to represent Florida students, but I’m confident their actions

do not represent many of their members who are working hard to provide their constituents with educational options. I look forward to working with those members next session to ensure every Florida parent is empowered to pick the school that best fits their child's learning needs."

Statement from House Speaker-Designate Steve Crisafulli (R-Merritt Island):

"I am shocked that the Florida School Boards Association, unions and others would challenge a parent's ability to choose the right school for their child. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program has given tens of thousands of Florida's low-income children access to schools that best meet their needs. This popular program has proven important in preparing many of the poorest and most disadvantaged of our children for success. I hope they will reconsider their actions and put the needs of children first."

Statement from Senate President Don Gaetz (R-Niceville):

"The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is a national model of school choice. Through this historic initiative, Florida businesses have voluntarily dedicated a portion of their corporate tax payments to help children in poverty, minority children and children with unique needs have access to schools and services otherwise available only to families with the means to pay for private school tuition.

"One of the hallmarks of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program has been the strong bipartisan support it has enjoyed in the Florida Legislature and among Florida families. Opening the doors of educational opportunity to children benefitting from these scholarships has united Republicans and Democrats for more than a decade. For the 2013-14 academic school year, 59,822 children in 64 counties have received the advantages of these scholarships. The program enrollment has more than doubled in the past five years.

"The lawsuit filed against this scholarship program by the Florida School Boards Association and others is ironically ill-timed and hypocritical.

"It is particularly ill-timed because the 2014 Legislature both improved the scholarship program and enacted strong academic and financial accountability measures. These measures ensure that students, their families and the public will know how children receiving the scholarships are performing compared to like students in traditional public schools. The law, which this litigation now seeks to overturn, also requires the Auditor General to perform detailed financial examinations of any scholarship funding organization administering the program in order to ensure good stewardship of taxpayer dollars. This lawsuit, if successful, would destroy this thriving school choice initiative at the very time it has taken on robust accountability requirements.

“The lawsuit is hypocritical. When Florida Tax Credit Scholarships were available only to the very poor, who disproportionately are minority families, and other students with unique needs, the School Boards Association didn’t challenge their constitutionality. These students often bring more challenges to the classroom and require extra help, more individualized instruction and additional resources. It is only now, when the eligibility for scholarships has been expanded and when less-impoveryished students can participate that the School Board Association has discovered its constitutional indignation.

“As a member of the Senate, I have been a prime sponsor of the Tax Credit Scholarship Program, as it has developed over the years. Now, I serve notice that, along with Speaker Weatherford and incoming leadership, I will vigorously defend the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program and the benefits it brings to tens of thousands of Florida families who only want what we all want – a chance for our children to learn and succeed.”